

Dario Argento's *Terror At The Opera* has long promised to be a movie worth making a song and dance about. Since it's finally due for release from Virgin we slipped Matthew Hopkins, a man who really does know his arias from his elbow, a tenor to take a long hard look at it and other musical(!) masterpieces.

The films of Italian horror maestro Dario Argento have always had an operatic quality about them. Now he's gone the whole hog and made a macabre movie called *Terror At The Opera* which is basically Dario's version of that old chestnut, *The Phantom Of The Opera*. If you read VW's exclusive interview with Argento in our Festive issue you will no doubt already be aware that this picture was shot three years ago (under the title of *Opera*), and that its cruel violence so stunned its American backers (Orion) that they chickened out of releasing it. The film is set in the Italian opera house, La Scala (La Scar-la?), where director Ian Charleson (who died of AIDS shortly after filming was finished) is mounting a lavish new version of Verdi's *Macbeth*. When the show's diva takes the injunction to 'break a leg' rather too literally on the opening night, it is left to the beautiful Betty (Cristina Marsillach) to take over the lead and predictably enough becomes an overnight sensation. But one of Betty's fans is a major-league loony who lurks around backstage and starts polishing off her friends and colleagues in the most gruesome ways imaginable; and to make sure that Betty misses none of the fun, the maniac tapes her eyes open with pins and forces her to watch as he slices 'n' dices 'em into little pieces...

The Virgin Video release of Argento's movie is missing about half an hour of running time, removing a host of talky sequences that help to explain the plot and many scenes where Argento's fluid camera roams the opera house. Some gore has been trimmed as well, of course. For example, the very first victim is stabbed through the throat and (in the full-length Italian version) Argento's camera dives into the unfortunate fellow's mouth to catch his skewered tongue wiggling around. Here that image has been excised, as has a reaction shot of the fellow rolling about on the ground being stabbed repeatedly!

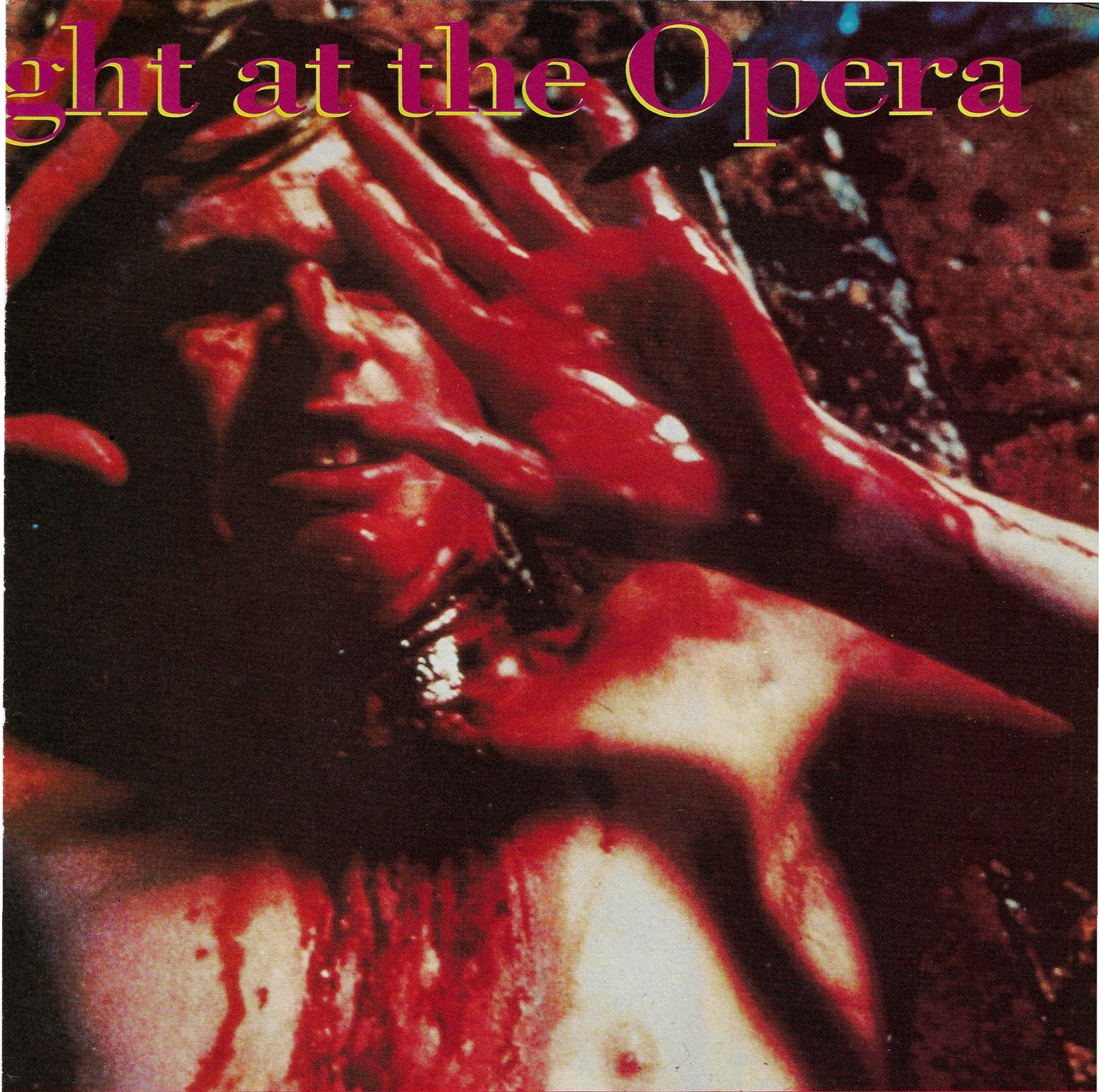
In another scene a girl swallows a vital

piece of evidence and the killer hacks her throat open to get at it. Much has been written about a startling bit of Argento camerawork which zooms down into the girl's oesophagus and out through the gaping knife wound. In fact this was shot but never used because the Sergio Stivaletti make-up proved to be less than satisfactory. For my money the best scene in the film (which remains completely intact here) is a tense and terrifying business in which somebody is shot through the eye; we get to see the missile travelling slo-ooo-wly down the barrel - and then it exit through the back of the victims head and smash a vase behind her!

Terror At The Opera's effects may be innovative, but its *Phantom Of The Opera*



Castle's Phantom of the Opera



ght at the Opera

storyline is a tried and trusted horror evergreen, first dreamed up by the 'pulp' writer Gaston Leroux way back in 1911. The 'penny dreadful' tale may well have faded into obscurity had not Universal pictures acquired the rights to it 12 years later as a lavish star vehicle for make-up maestro Lon Chaney Jr. One million dollars was spent bringing the original *Phantom Of The Opera* (Polygram Video) to the screen. It was a faithful adaptation of the Leroux story, and Chaney was superb as Erik, the disfigured maniac composer (an escapee from Devil's Island) who has made his home in the catacombs beneath the Paris Opera House. Wearing his mask he ventures out

to take a personal interest in the career of understudy Christine Daae (Mary Philbin), killing everyone who blocks her path to fame.

Even today, the original *Phantom* still has the power to shock audiences. In the film's most chilling scene, the Phantom sits at the organ playing his own composition, 'Don Juan Triumphant.' Philbin is overwhelmed by curiosity and inches towards him, mustering the courage to touch his mask. At last she tears it away, revealing a living skull, with deathly pale skin hanging against the bone underneath. So terrifying was the image that many members of the audience were reported to have fainted

dead away!

The box-office success of the film was considerable and in 1943 Universal re-made it in lurid technicolor and sound, this time starring Claude Rains in the Chaney role (the great horror star had died of throat cancer some years earlier). Rains played Erique Claudin, a violinist in the Paris Opera orchestra who was cheated out of his lifetime work (a piano concerto) by an unscrupulous publisher and had acid thrown in his face to add injury to insult. Retreating to the catacombs beneath the Opera House, the now-insane Erique plotted his revenge, at the same time nurturing the career of budding opera star Christine played by

Suzanne Foster).

This second movie version of Leroux's yarn introduced the popular plot concept that the Phantom was not inherently evil, but a rather decent fellow driven mad by circumstances. It also had a great deal of opera in it, which tended to work against the horror elements. Universal realised you couldn't do a picture like this on the cheap, so they lavished a fortune on superb sets, vivid photography and fine musicians. The film's best moment came when the enraged Erique unscrewed a giant chandelier and dropped it on the unsuspecting audience, creating pandemonium. This replaced the unmasking scene (which was a bit of a damp squib here because Rains' make-up wasn't so hot) as the highlight of the picture.

Though highly regarded by genre buffs, the Claude Rains *Phantom* lost money, and it was to be another two decades before Leroux's death-headed demon haunted the screen once more. That was in 1962, when our own Hammer Films contributed a cut-price version which the locale from Paris to London and starred Herbert Lom as the title terror (Christopher Lee had turned the part down). This employed exactly the same plot as the 1943 version, but didn't do much that was new and exciting. The film also suffered major shortcomings in the make-up department, Lom's scarred face was shown only very briefly, causing *TIME* magazine to scoff 'This new Phantom is about as dangerous as dear old grandad dressed up for Halloween'. And Hammer were suitably embarrassed when the film was awarded a mild 'A' certificate by the British censor.

Needless to say, the Hammer version was a financial flop. And so was *Phantom Of The Paradise* (1974), an unusual modern updating of the Leroux story in which William Finley played a rock composer called Winslow Leach who was ripped off by evil company boss Paul Williams, and hopelessly disfigured in an accident at a record-pressing plant. Stylishly directed by Brian De Palma, the movie was designed more as an outrageous spoof on the music business than an out-and-out horror movie, but it succeeded as neither.

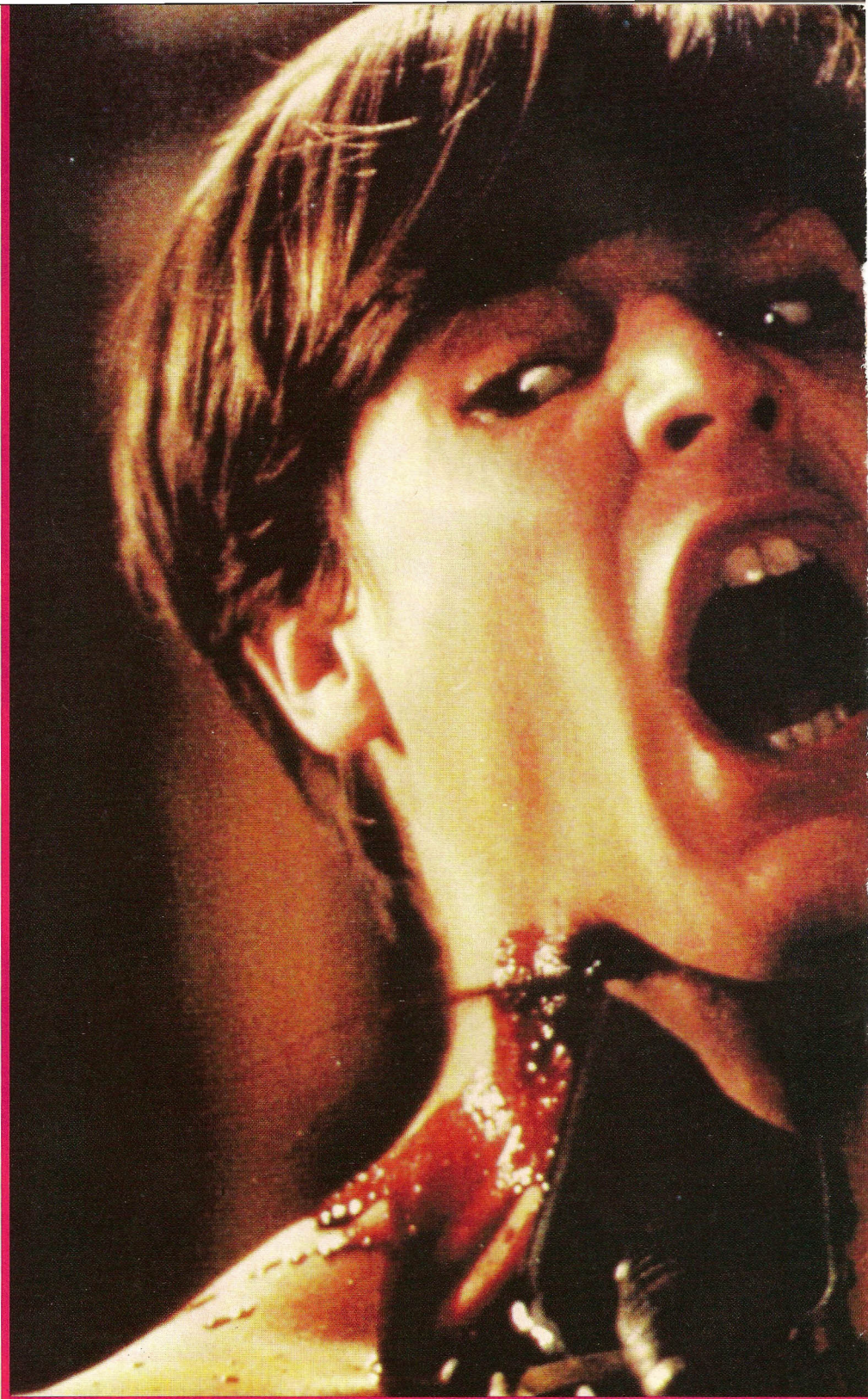
That should have been the end of the Phantom saga as far as the movies were concerned. But Leroux's character was not given a chance to rest in peace. *Phantom*-fever hit with a vengeance in 1986 when Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom Of The Opera* musical opened in London's West End. Hollywood caught on

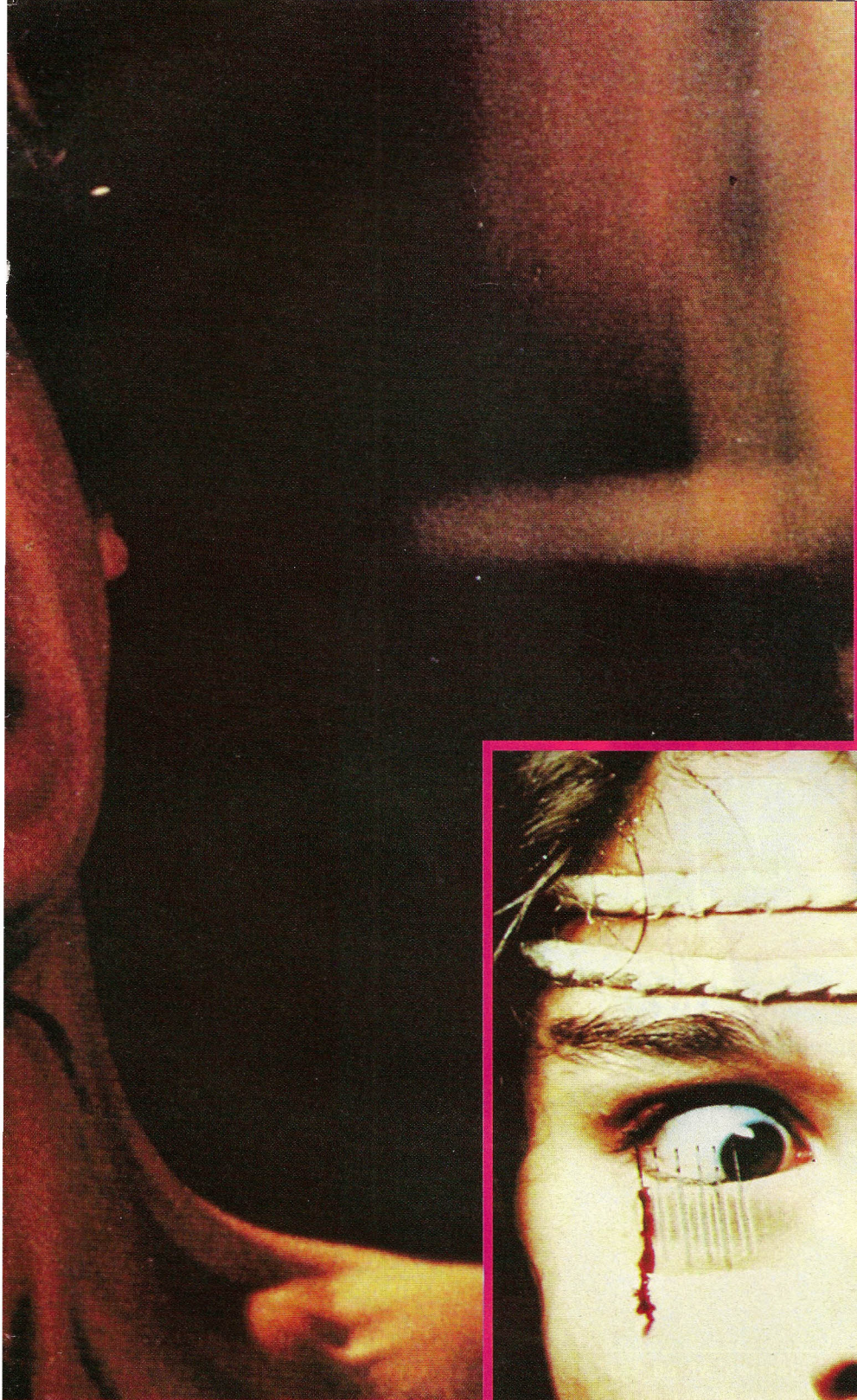
quickly to the stage productions' staggering success and pretty soon brand new celluloid Phantoms began to crawl out of the woodwork.

A number of them were made for the small screen, including a classy affair shot in Budapest with Maximilian Schell playing the character as a deranged Hungarian voice teacher. This is available on the CBS Fox label and benefits from handsome production design, a literate script and excellent Stan Winston make-up. Less inspired was *Phantom Of The Mall* (Castle), a low-budget affair about a crazed teen (Derek Rydall) out for revenge on the greedy property developers who

destroyed his house in an arson attack.

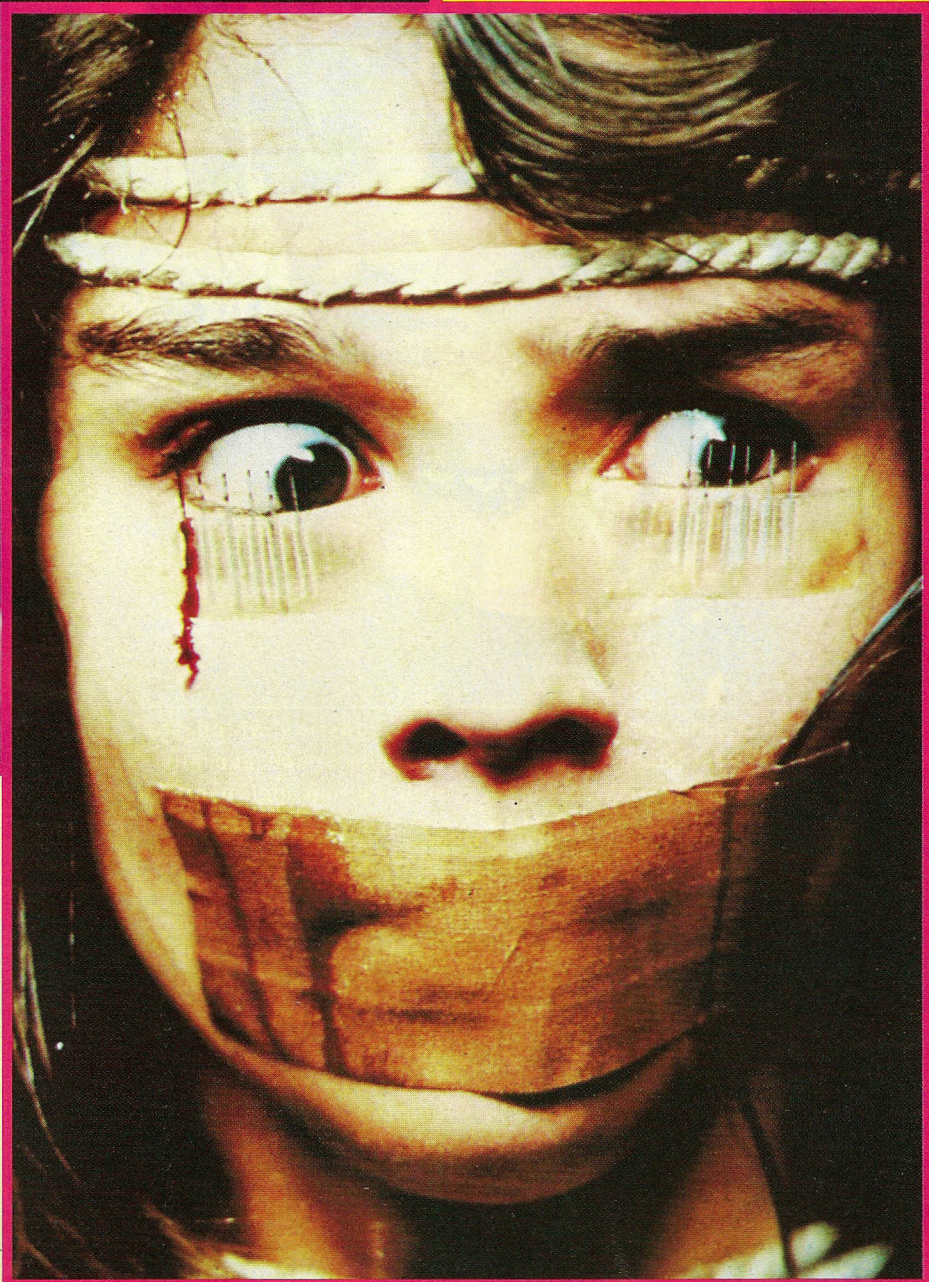
The most notably macabre of all recent Phantoms has been the much-publicised Robert Englund version (released by Castle Pictures). This thankfully abandoned the pathos of the 1943 and 1962 films and turned the character back into a thoroughly evil fellow who has sold his soul to the devil for the chance of immortality. The \$6 million picture has the handsome look of vintage Hammer, but goes with the flow of today's horror flicks by dwelling on lick-lipping close-ups of gory beheadings and scenes in which Englund's character stitches his face on! It actually begins in the present day, with





confused?). Audiences responded rather better to *Darkman*, a lively comic-book adventure from Sam Raimi (due for release on video in April) which cast Liam Neeson as a modern-day and surprisingly heroic Phantom, out for revenge on the gangsters who gave him an acid facial. Of course there was no opera in Raimi's picture, just a rousing music score by *Batman*'s Danny Elfman.

As to how UK video viewers will react to Argento's *Terror At The Opera*, well that remains to be seen. Fans of Dario's bold visual pyrotechnics will undoubtedly revel in the movie's many dazzling set-pieces. The non-converted might find themselves scratching their heads over some of the plot twists (and if you can make sense of that dippy ending then you're a better man than I). But if you're ANY sort of horror buff then you really ought to track it down. After all, a bit of culture never did anyone any harm. Did it?



soprano Jill (*The Stepfather*) Schoelen auditioning for a show singing the Phantom's long-forgotten music. Then an accident transports her back to London in the 1880s and we're off on a scary re-run of a familiar story, crammed with plenty of tongue-in-cheek 'Freddy-isms' from Englund. It's good, gory fun, if perhaps a little slow moving and predictable in places.

The fact that this picture did not meet with the success it deserved probably comes down to its plot being too familiar (and with three versions of *Phantom Of The Opera* already crowding video shop shelves, is it any wonder punters got